

Specialised universities | How special are they?

In a new and exclusive analysis of the strengths of higher education institutions that specialise in particular subject areas, U-Multirank reveals that, on average, being specialised doesn't accompany any improved performance in research, although it may help universities to forge partnerships with industry.



Conventional wisdom might suggest that specialised universities will do better in their research performance than universities with a more comprehensive range of subjects because they can focus their efforts. U-Multirank's new findings, however, show no significant difference in the number of top 'A' scores across almost every measure of research performance (see figs. [6](#), [7](#), [8](#) and [9](#)).

That was the case until it came to '[co-publications with industry](#)' (a measure that records the number of research papers jointly produced with industrial partners, see [fig. 1](#)) and '[revenues from Continuing Professional Development](#)' (income earned for running or certifying training programmes, see [fig. 2](#)). All of a sudden, the difference between specialised and comprehensive universities was too big to ignore.

The differences in the amount of [research published jointly by universities and industry](#) became even more marked when we looked at only those universities that grant doctorates (i.e. those with traditionally the strongest research basis, see [fig. 3](#)).

This suggests that, regardless of actual research performance, industry is more likely to team up with specialised institutions for joint research work than with comprehensive universities.

We can speculate about the reasons for this. Maybe specialised institutions are able to be more focused in their relationships with relevant firms. Maybe being specialised gives them a reputational advantage or makes them more immediately obvious candidates for partnership. Maybe it is a feature of the subjects in which they typically specialise. Or maybe specialist institutions are genuinely better at understanding the needs of industry in applying research.

To answer this, further research would be needed. U-Multirank makes this possible, particularly for individual universities that want to analyse their own strengths and weaknesses in the light of these new findings. This demonstrates the need to be able to capture performance across a broad range of measures and descriptive features of different universities.

For students, research partners and other stakeholders in higher education, U-Multirank data can also reveal whether a specialised university actually offers real advantages in terms of their particular and varying needs.

U-Multirank takes into account the breadth and scope of a university's activities when comparing its performance to others. In determining whether a university should be described as 'specialised', 'broad' or 'comprehensive' we look at the number of educational subject areas studied by the university's graduates.

We distinguish ten broad subjects and those that offer degrees in just three or fewer are classed as 'specialised'. Those with seven or more are 'comprehensive', with 'broad' universities covering the middle ground (see [fig. 4](#)). The subject areas in which universities most commonly specialise are [business studies](#), health and engineering (see [fig. 5](#)).

To view all figures and graphics at a glance, click the link: [Figures & Graphics](#)

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